

Caliban's Dance

FE after The Tempest

EXTRACT: CHAPTER 15



Edited by
Maire Daley, Kevin Orr and Joel Petrie

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# 'I urge you to hear me': Changing prison education for the better

*Vicky Butterby, Claire Collins and  
David Powell*



There is a tradition of prisoners writing letters. It remains an important part of prison culture and is one way for prisoners to communicate their experiences of being imprisoned, presenting their ideas, concerns, fears, and hopes. Our chapter seeks to add to this tradition by conjuring two new prison letters about prison education: the prisoner Caliban's letter to Prospero, his jailer, and Prospero's reply. Then we employ the theory of practice architectures (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014b) to illuminate the messages raised within them. We conclude by arguing that if we want to reimagine and change prison education for the better, we could start with a sincere, genuine and democratic 'conversation' (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014a: 149) with prisoners about their hopes for a better life upon release.

*Dear Prospero,*

*You think you know me, you think you know what's best for me – that you know my heart and my mind and my spirit. But I know this place, the beating heart of this island, its magic and its mayhem, the rhythm to which it dances. I, Caliban, too have knowledge that I can share.*

*For my (past) actions I am deeply sorry, for I have come to understand meeting violence with violence will never a happy union be.*

*I, Caliban, hurt people.*

*I, Caliban, did wrong.*



*I make no bones about the mistakes I made. And now I urge you to walk in my shoes, come hide with me under my cloak and peer out at my world as I see it. For you speak of distant lands, opportunity and possibility. You speak in metaphors and use miracles and magic tricks ... yet I, Caliban, do not have the liberty of your view. You gave me a map I cannot read, spells I cannot conjure, words I cannot say.*

*And in this, I, Caliban, have too been wronged.*

*I, Caliban, have been mistreated. I have been oppressed and marginalized and abused and hurt. I am at the margins, I am clinging on to the cuff of your coat. I need you to understand my story too. I need you to 'always ask why'.*

*Others who share my story tell me: 'you don't do it because you want to, you do it because you have to'. At the time, I, Caliban, also saw no other way, for me all hope was lost.*

*I, Caliban, write this letter to share something of my life with you, to help you understand what I need and how I can make different choices now that the Tempest's storm has passed. Please hear me. For too long I have felt unworthy of voice, I have communicated only in curses, I urge you to put aside your preconceptions. I urge you to hear me, Caliban, as I speak to you.*

*Help me see the wonder in learning, help me put it to good use. Don't tell me there is hope for the future if there is nothing but old bones to hang my new clothes on. Bring with your hope a sense of realism, let me put what you teach me to good use now. Help me understand the purpose behind what it is you wish me to learn.*

*I, Caliban, do not want to be part of your system – a number, a payment by results, a box to be ticked. Share with me the wonders and the whys, link what I learn to my aspirations, even when they do not fit with those you hold for me. Do not underestimate my insider knowledge. You are merely a visitor to this isle – this is my home.*

*Do not give me new clothes if you will not teach me how to wear them, if you will not help me find those places where wearing them brings me hope. Remember my new robes may not mean so much in my world, they are easily discarded, disregarded, they are easily stained. The hope I feel can easily become a mirage if there is nowhere for me to wear them with meaning and with pride. Do not ask me to journey to foreign lands if you are not*

*prepared to challenge the inequalities within my world that hold me captive.*

*I, Caliban, cannot be boxed. I am everything and nothing and my mind rocks back and forth with the pain of what I have done. If you want me to learn your ways, give me first the space to learn myself, to understand my emotions, to process past hurts and to understand how I have come to be the Caliban that resides here in this place. Understand that we do not share the same experience of the world, of the land that we inhabit together. The calm waters you enjoy can be a tempest for me. The privilege you possess has awarded you many long years in study, your head lost in your books, the magician of your craft. You taught me how to say your words, but understand this, I am still learning how to speak your language. Accept and own your privileges, acknowledge we were not born equal, you and I, and envision your role as one that challenges inequality in all its forms – doing so will serve you well if you truly want to bring me hope.*

*I, Caliban, am a person.*

*I, Caliban, am human.*

*Treat me as a person. Treat me as a human being, treat me as one of your kind. Ask me how goes my day when you pass me by. Small gestures such as these can mean a lot to me. Give me opportunities where I do not need to choose learning over a higher wage – please understand that whilst I am captive in this land, immediate gains will outweigh future plans, they are what keep me going, what I look forward to most.*

*Too many times I have had to tell my story, repeat myself again and again to those who do not talk amongst themselves. Do not fragment me and my experience in this place, for I, Caliban, am whole, I am more than the sum of my parts. Collaborate across this land and put plans in place with me – in doing so you will understand the big picture of my experiences and the things that will help me most. Ask me my opinions, ask me how I feel, ask me what I think could help. Remember, I know this place like no other, and in ways you never will. Get me actively involved and I will teach you to use your nails to dig for nuts, to engage with your senses, to feel your way in this mysterious land. Approach my time with you holistically and I will share all that is hidden, the subtleties of my experience, my hopes, my joys, my*

*expectations. You do not know this place as I do, but if you are open to what I have to share, then let me help you understand.*

*I, Caliban, humbly await your response.*

*Dear Caliban,*

*There was a time when your words and ideas would have appeared to me naive, coming not from my once-beloved books, but from your uneducated mind. I would have asked: what could you know of the route to civility and a good life? What could you tell me about of which the literatures did not speak? I was wrong, I see this now, and I wish to learn from our time together and your wisdom so that the future I help to create back in my homeland does not fall foul of such lack of understanding.*

*What then can I learn from you?*

*I still believe that knowledge and understanding can unlock new ways of seeing and being in the world. You have helped me see that the value of this learning cannot be assumed or enforced; it is only when you are able to imagine your own future that learning can contribute to that dream. Ah, to dream with unfettered optimism – am I so naive? No, I see now that your world will not change through your or my agency alone. Our lives are interconnected, our dreams made or broken on our own and others' volition.*

*I sent you to learn and told you that you could only earn a wage when you had proven your learning achieved. Did this mean that to learn felt like a punishment to you? I believe that to be so, and I wish that you knew how lucky you were to have this chance to learn from a civilized man about a civilized world. But, again, I assume we share an idea of 'civility' and I assume that this is good in and of itself. How easy it is to forget what you tell me, and remember only my own ideas of good living.*

*How can we seek to influence one another in ways that nurture and shape our dreams? Perhaps our greatest gift is to listen, not with minds full of our own ideas of goodness and justice, but with open minds, seeking to understand the paths we have each taken, the robes we all wear and the tasks we must do to fulfill our many obligations and achieve our dreams. Did I listen to you while you were my captive? I fear not, and not Ariel who was so compliant in pursuit of her freedom, or Miranda, who could have helped me understand your crimes better. I attended only to my*

*books, not to anyone who could have helped me understand the island life we all shared. But despite my previously closed ears, I ask that you hear me now as I try to explain what I will do to atone for my ignorance. I will take not the stance of an enemy as you had previously felt, but of a fellow traveller, seeking to make the world a better place. I will speak to everyone and make time to understand what they say and do and feel and why. I will try to play my part in changing all our lives and I do this in the hope that we may all have a brighter tomorrow.*

*Thank you for helping me understand what learning can mean, outside my books and scholarly ways. You taught me how to use my nails to dig for nuts, to engage with my senses, to feel my way in that mysterious land and this, this is what civility means in the island life you will continue to have now that I am gone.*

*Goodbye Caliban and fare you well. I hope we meet again in the next life, when perhaps we can walk as brothers through a fairer land.*

*Prospero*

The theory of practice architectures is a contemporary, site-based theory of practice that can help us better read the messages in Caliban and Prospero's letters. It does this by illuminating the three arrangements of a prison – the ideas and language of the social-cultural arrangements, the resources (physical, spatial and temporal) of the material-economic arrangements and the relationships of the socio-political arrangements – and how they shape the practices of its education projects (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014b). This architecture reveals how the practices of prisoners' learning, teaching and training, and prison leadership more generally, are shaped.

Caliban's letter suggests he is being shaped by his social circumstances and external factors: 'you don't do it because you want to, you do it because you have to'. However, he recognizes that prison education too is being shaped by paternalistic ideas that know what's best for the Calibans in our prisons. The teaching and instructing practices of prison education staff are dictated by government policy so, like Caliban, they can argue that 'you don't do it because you want to, you do it because you have to'. It seems it is not only the prisoners who might feel powerless in our prison education system.

Caliban is asking for a number of things from the prison staff, educators, and leaders. First, he asks that the relationships with prison staff and education staff are respectful: 'Treat me as a human being, treat me as



one of your kind. Ask me how goes my day when you pass me by. Small gestures such as these can mean a lot to me.' Then, he wants prison staff and education staff to demonstrate the idea of patient hope (Webb, 2013) with him: 'If you want me to learn your ways, give me first the space to learn myself, to understand my emotions, to process past hurts and to understand how I have come to be the Caliban that resides here in this place.' He also asks that he is told 'the purpose behind what it is you wish me to learn', he understands the economics of prison capitalism and its payment by results (Collins, Powell, and Wilkinson, forthcoming). In addition, he wants prison leaders to imagine and implement forms of prison education that offer opportunities, so 'I do not need to choose learning over a higher wage', because 'whilst I am captive in this land, immediate gains will outweigh future plans, they are what keep me going, what I look forward to most'. Most importantly, he is asking for prisoner-centred learning. A form of prison education that offers Caliban and all other prisoners transformative hope (Webb, 2013), a realistic and hopeful new future, even if his hopes 'do not fit with those you hold for me'. And, when Caliban is released, he wants support to be in place that removes 'the inequalities within my world that hold me captive', so he can begin his new life with hope and confidence. More than anything, he wants prison staff to listen and learn from him.

What is so powerful about Prospero's response is its reflexivity; an openness to listening. We assert that if prison education is to be reimaged, the process must start with prison leaders, teachers, and instructors listening to and learning from the Calibans of this world. By jointly reflecting 'on the character, conduct and consequences of their practices' (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014a: 16) and the development of open communicative spaces in which a sincere, genuine, and democratic conversation will be generated about what constitutes good prison education from a prisoners' perspective. We recognize this may be a very different way for prisons to work, though we assert that this 'morally and ethically committed' (*ibid.*: 27) praxis could change for the better the lives of those who live, learn, and work in prisons. We hope by pursuing such an approach it would not only be 'history-making' (*ibid.*: 27) but also meet the goal of prison education that, in our view, is to prepare prisoners to live well in a world worth living in.

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